

VISIT COACHING

SUPPORTING FAMILIES TO MEET THEIR CHILDREN'S NEEDS

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Visit coaching is an exciting innovation in family visits with children in foster care. Visit coaching is fundamentally different from supervised visits: the coach is actively involved in supporting parents to meet their children's unique needs and capitalize on their strengths as a family.

Visit coaching includes:

- Encouraging parents to prepare for their children's feelings and behaviors in visits
- Helping parents take charge of their family's visits and plan specifically how they will meet their children's needs
- Appreciating parents' strengths in responding to each of their children
- Assisting parents in coping with their feelings in order to (a) visit consistently and (b) keep their anger and sadness from undermining happy visits with their children
- Supporting a shared view of each child's needs and communication to facilitate co-parenting between parent and foster parent/kin.*

When caseworkers, case aides, parent advocates, foster parents and others are trained as visit coaches, children and parents enjoy visits, parent participation is more consistent, and foster parents feel more able to manage children's post-visit adjustment.

Parents prefer visit coaching to parenting class because it is a hands-on approach applied directly to their children. They appreciate having a visit coach provide encouragement during visits that builds on what they already know instead of a class taught by a teacher who has not met their children. Parents get defensive when parenting classes focus on techniques that they perceive to be culturally insensitive. Visit coaches intentionally support parents' own approaches to meet the unique needs of their

* Throughout this article the term "parent" is intended to be inclusive of any person visiting the child in foster care, including both parents, a parent and partner, grandparents or other relatives. When the term "foster parent" is used, relative/kinship caregivers are included (when visit coaching is requested after informal visits in kinship care break down because of family conflict).

children (and avoid directing parenting). Visit coaching offers a laboratory for a parent to enlarge their repertoire of fun ways to play with their children.

Families get confusing messages about visits leading them to believe that visits are another hoop to jump through in order to get their children back. Parents' unrealistic hopes for a short timeframe for reunification contribute to this misunderstanding of visits. Visiting is more productive when, soon after removal, parents understand that the purposes of visits are to make their children happy and to demonstrate how they meet their children's needs.

/ VISIT COACHING IS BASED ON A BELIEF THAT FAMILIES CAN OVERCOME
SADNESS & OTHER OBSTACLES TO MAKE VISITS HAPPY FOR THEIR
CHILDREN

/ VISIT COACHING IS AN IMPORTANT WAY TO REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF
LOSS & HARM OF SEPARATION ON CHILDREN.

/ VISIT COACHING ENCOURAGES THE FAMILY'S CULTURAL PREFERENCES
AS WELL AS BIRTHDAY PARTIES AND OTHER TRADITIONAL
CELEBRATIONS THAT INCLUDE THE EXTENDED FAMILY

/ THROUGH VISIT COACHING PARENTS PRACTICE THE LIFELONG HABIT OF
ASKING "WHAT DOES MY CHILD NEED?" & FLEXIBLY ADJUSTING
THEIR PARENTING TO MEET THOSE NEEDS

Empowering parents to plan their visits builds on their strengths. Instead of viewing the agency as owning the visit (setting the time, place, frequency and conditions), families are coached to take charge of visits and make them as homelike as possible. The coach guides while appreciating the unique ways the family shows love for their children. Parents are encouraged to make visits a celebration of the family by doing things they enjoyed when they lived together, taking pictures, making a family scrapbook, and telling family stories.

Parents are helped to manage competition between the children for the parent's attention in visits. Coaches help parents spend a little special time with each child during the visit. Each child has unique needs, and coaches help parents not take their children's behavior personally and instead stand in each child's shoes. By confirming that meeting their children's needs can be frustrating and exhausting, the visit coach gives the parent valuable support.

Children are placed in foster care to protect them from neglect or abuse, but separation from their families causes a range of feelings and behaviors in children that concern parents and foster parents. It is not surprising that many parents say the children they see in visits are not the same children the agency removed. Children who are separated from their families often are irritable, angry, withdrawn, aggressive, and sad, cling to foster parents and/or parents, and have sleep problems and diminished

appetite or hoard food in the foster home and during visits. Additionally, some have difficulty accept comforting, and some show fearfulness, vigilance, and anxiety. If the child's reactions to removal are not understood and the parent and foster parent are not helped to respond in ways that fit each child, he/she may be delayed in progress in school, social skill development, and learning to regulate emotions in age-appropriate ways and be at risk of multiple placements and delayed reunification.

It is normal for a child removed from home to have reactions to visits, which are usually not a sign that the visit is harmful for the child. Foster parents and parents require support to manage children's reactions to visits including being: (a) happy and relieved to see his/her family because he/she misses them; (b) confused, especially about why he/she cannot go home and has two sets of parents; (c) sad and angry about being separated from his/her family and feeling out-of-control; (d) angry and sometimes fearful about maltreatment; (e) guilty that being taken away from home is his/her fault; (f) worried about being disloyal to his/her family and/or foster family; and (g) worried about whether his/her parents, siblings, and other family members are okay

Most children do not put these feelings into words; instead, their behaviors reflect their feelings. Regression (being babyish, whining, demanding, or scared), numbing or denying of feelings, sadness, irritability, aggression, overactivity, and physical pains are common prior to, during and following visits.

It is not easy to care for a grieving or protesting child during visits or in the foster home. Parents may minimize the child's feelings because they think the child is too young to react to trauma or because their child's behavior makes them feel guilty. If the child continues to be aggressive or withdrawn, the frustrated parent or foster parent may become less emotionally available although the child desperately needs loving adults to trust. Visit coaches help parents respond to children whose needs would frustrate the most skilled parents and support both parents and foster parents not give up in reaching out to the child.

Coaching helps the parent and foster parent encourage the child to live happily in two different families which relieves painful disloyalty pressures. Without being aware of it, well-intentioned family members and foster parents can contribute to the child's confusion about who to love, who is better, and what to do with negative feelings toward either family. It is important not only for the foster parent and parent to communicate but for the child to see them interact in a friendly way. When caseworkers and visit coaches include parents and foster parents together in regular discussions of how to improve visits, everyone has a shared understanding of a child's difficult behaviors and can use the same approaches in managing them.

One of the challenges of visit coaching is helping parents not get discouraged--change takes time, time when they feel they are losing their children. They get frustrated that "the system" is so slow. They feel helpless and hopeless. Many parents have been debilitated themselves by trauma, learning disabilities, and poverty, and they are fragile as they "start their lives over" in alcohol and drug treatment and domestic violence programs. Finding housing, going to or looking for work, and attending treatment are time-consuming and draining.

Separating from their child in visit after visit is so painful that it is remarkable families do not give up. When they come for visits, parents may be overwhelmed by their mixed feelings of pleasure, sadness, awkwardness and defensiveness as well as competitiveness with the foster parent. Even though they enjoy their children, visits make most parents feel sad, inadequate and powerless. Coaches help make the pain of visits tolerable for parents so they will return consistently over the long months that their children are in care.

Visits may flood parents with anger and sadness about the loss of their children. The parent benefits from the visit coach's validation of their complicated feelings about visits. But the visit coach's primary goal is to help the parent stand in the child's shoes. Coaches support them to put their reactions aside in order to concentrate on meeting their child's needs during the visit.

While it might be tempting to skip the formal step of planning each visit around the specific needs of the children, it is the key to helping parents demonstrate they can keep their children safe in the future. Families may come to visits without having the opportunity to think about how to make them happy for their children. The lasting benefit of visit coaching is the parent saying to him/herself as the child develops, years after the foster care placement, "What does my child need?" Special visit planning occurs in visit coaching with infants and teenagers. Visit coaches support parents in attuning to their infants by emphasizing that reciprocal communication with newborns develops attachment. Visit coaches support teenagers have improved communication with family members and other adults so they can have enduring connections when they leave foster care.

Implementing visit coaching with families when their children enter care, or in preparation for home visits prior to discharge, requires leadership for an approach entirely different from supervised office visits involving:

- Training for visit coaches so they resist directing visits or telling parents how to parent: for someone who has been removed from the parenting role and feels guilt and anger about what has happened to their child, it is unlikely that direction to interact with their child or discipline in a certain way, for example, will make visits productive. Training can include a more diverse group than formerly supervised visits (including MSW interns, foster parents, parent advocates, parenting class teachers and others).
- Visit coaches supporting parents to plan their visits to meet their children's unique needs in their own way, especially to help their children with feelings and behaviors connected to their removal from home.
- Visit coaches meeting with parents 15-30 minutes before and after each visit to review their children's needs and validate the parent's anger, sadness, guilt, and loss of confidence so these feelings do not get in the way of meeting their children's needs.

- Purchasing (or arranging donations of) sturdy, versatile toys, books, art supplies, photo albums, a Polaroid camera, children's music CDs, a portable CD player, and supplies for birthday parties for visit coaching; some agencies have large plastic bins of these visit coaching supplies accessible to families during visit coaching.

- Coached visits outside the agency in places that the parent finds conducive to their usual family interaction and that fit the needs of the children (including the family's or foster family's home). Visit coaches also go with parents to support their involvement in their child's school, early childhood program, activities, and medical appointments. Coached visits can occur outside the agency much earlier than unsupervised visits because the coach will be with the family. If coached visits occur in the agency, families visit in private rooms where they feel comfortable playing with their children (for example, with clean floor mats and without furniture that interferes with playing).

- A visit coaching play group for building on parents' strengths in playing with their children ("Baby and Me" groups at St. Christopher Otilie in New York City have been documented on an ACS DVD).

- Visit coaches supporting communication about the child's needs and positive interaction between the parent and foster parent.

- Replacing traditional parenting classes with visit coaching.

- An individualized format for visit coaches to write notes about each visit that document the children's needs and what the parent did to meet each need as well as a parent self-assessment.

Marty Beyer is a child welfare and juvenile justice consultant with a Ph.D. in clinical/community psychology from Yale University. She assisted Alabama and

Oregon in implementing strengths/needs-based child welfare practice and now serves on the Katie A. Panel in Los Angeles. Her child welfare publications include "Too Little, Too Late: Designing Family Support to Succeed," "Keeping Families Together: The Role of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Treatment Providers," "One Child and Family at a Time: Strengths/Needs-Based Service Crafting," "Visitation as a Powerful Child Welfare Service" and "Developmentally-Sound Practice in Family and Juvenile Court." Marty invented visit coaching, and was invited by ACS, the New York City child welfare agency, to train private foster care agencies, the staff of the new ACS family center, and other ACS staff, in visit coaching (as part of a major ACS visit improvement effort which included outstanding visit policies, visits with incarcerated parents, and sibling visits). She developed a visit coaching certification program, supported by her Visit Coaching manual and DVDs produced by ACS. Marty has been invited to other states to provide visit coaching training, and she looks forward to the completion of proposed research on the outcomes of visit coaching. She can be contacted at martbeyer@aol.com.

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